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The Most Together Fucked-Up Guy in the Universe: A Conversation with Stephen Elliott (<http://thenervousbreakdown.com/gfrangelo/2010/08/the-most-together-fucked-up-guy-in-the-universe-a-conversation-with-stephen-elliott/>)

By Gina Frangello (<http://thenervousbreakdown.com/author/gfrangelo/>)
August 27, 2010
[Interview](#) (/)

I've been contemplating the nature of Stephen Elliott's appeal. The author of several books of fiction, including the acclaimed and popular *Happy Baby*, it was his memoir, *The Adderall Diaries*, that seems to have catapulted him to the status of a literary "cult hero."

Many critics have lauded *Adderall Diaries* as a work of genius—an assessment with which I so strongly concur that I have felt, at times over the past year, like Elliott's pimp I seem to rave about him so frequently in public forums. In fact, I might even feel a little creepy about it were it not for the fact that everywhere I go, I meet people who have been as deeply impacted by his work as I, and who are similarly shouting it from the rooftops to the point that they (such as the novelist [Karen Palmer](http://www.karenpalmer.com) (<http://www.karenpalmer.com>)) profess to

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(<http://thenervousbreakdown.com/genemorgan/2018/12/brads-face/>)

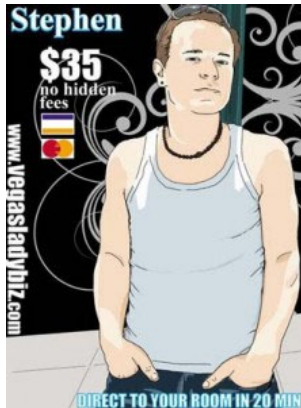
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» 'Two Poems,' by Shy Watson
(<http://thenervousbreakdown.com/shywatson/2018/11/two-poems-2/>)

» 'Vile As I Am,' by Richard Chiem
(<http://thenervousbreakdown.com/richardchiem/2018/12/vile-as-i-am/>)

» 'Two Prose Poems,' by Zarah Butcher-McGunnigle
(<http://thenervousbreakdown.com/zarahbm/2018/11/two-prose-poems/>)

» 'Two Stories,' by Willis



(http://www.thenervousbreakdown.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/stephen_elliott_comic.jpg) So what's with this guy? Why are so many people obsessed with him? To describe his writing style as "intimate" would be inadequate (he is, perhaps, the most intimate writer I've ever read) and yet he possesses an acute sense—deeper, in fact, than that of many writers who divulge much less about themselves in their work—that writing cannot merely be about the writer's demons, whims or confessions. It's an intriguing combination that seems to help Elliott function simultaneously as a spokeswriter for the disenfranchised who have traditionally existed on the fringe of artistic culture—runaways, sex workers, addicts, masochists—and yet also as a general literary "therapist," not unlike The Rumpus' earthy and wise advice columnist, "Dear Sugar" (<http://therumpus.net/sections/blogs/dear-sugar/>). For Elliott's obsession, more so than with any sexual fetish or drug, seems to be the pursuit of truth and art, with living a life of integrity, with the rights of children, and with what it requires to achieve true human connection. This is the fodder of his work, never in a sanctimonious or distant way, but from the perspective of a desperate, sometimes-drug-addled, dominatrix-hiring seeker whose voice (despite being quintessentially unreliable for obvious reasons) we simply *believe*. Reading Elliott—whether in one of his books or in his Daily Rumpus emails—the reader cannot help but be reminded that writing is, first and foremost, a form of communication. I am not sure I have ever encountered a writer whose body of work—fiction, non, and blog-like—seems to illustrate this more than Elliott's. Daringly open, deeply engaged, and equipped with an eerie insight that was hard-earned on the streets and in group homes, one of Elliott's favorite topics is his own fucked-up-ed-ness, but I've got to admit that if I didn't know so many people who know him much better than I do and promise me this is not some kind of marketing schtick, I might almost disbelieve it because he is so damn *wise*. There is a "Physician, heal

» 'Pumpkin', by Jennifer Plummer
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» 'Three Poems', by Mikaela Grantham
(<http://thenervousbreakdown.com/mikaela-grantham/2018/11/three-poems/>)

» 'Two Poems', by Connor Ong
(<http://thenervousbreakdown.com/connorong/2018/11/two-poems/>)

» 'Two Short Ones', by Alec Berry
(<http://thenervousbreakdown.com/alecberry/2018/12/two-short-ones/>)

» 'Prize', by Elle Nash
(<http://thenervousbreakdown.com/ellenash/2018/12/prize/>)

» 'I Have a Terrible Feeling', by Adam Soldofsky
(<http://thenervousbreakdown.com/adamsoldofsky/2018/12/i-have-a-terrible-feeling/>)

» 'Wadi al-Salam', by Mesha Maren
(<http://thenervousbreakdown.com/meshamaren/2018/12/wadi-al-salam/>)

» 'Primitive Men', by Michael Earl Craig
(<http://www.thenervousbreakdown.com/mecraig/2013/07/primitive-men/>)

» 'Wayne Koestenbaum: The TNB Self-Interview', by Wayne Koestenbaum
(<http://www.thenervousbreakdown.com/tnbnonfiction/2013/08/wayne-koestenbaum-the-tnb-self-interview/>)

» 'Four Poems', by Sarah Jean Grimm
(<http://thenervousbreakdown.com/sarahjeangrimm/2018/12/four-poems-2/>)

» 'Three Poems', by Sam Pink
(<http://thenervousbreakdown.com/sampink/2018/12/three-poems-2/>)

myself paradox about Elliott, but in the end this quality of the artist as a wounded boy-man haunted by demons he makes no effort to hide, yet at the same time the smartest and best (indirect) advice-giver you may ever encounter, is only one of the many intriguing aspects of Elliott's persona and his work.

I've read with Stephen at Chicago's one-of-a-kind queer indie bookstore, *Quimby's* (<http://www.quimbys.com>); he blurbed my collection *Slut Lullabies* (<http://www.ginafrangelo.com>); we've exchanged the odd email here and there and once spoke on the phone. But I am such a fan that when Brad Listi approached me and asked if I'd like to interview him to celebrate the release of *Adderall Diaries* in paperback, I basically nearly wet my pants in excitement, and had sent him these long-winded questions within a couple of hours. Busy as he is, I figured I might hear from him in a week or so. But because Stephen is about as manic as I am, instead I had the answers in less than 48 hours.

By the way, Stephen himself suggested that I include the Q&As that he "couldn't really answer." But I'd already planned to do that, because his non-answers are answers of a sort, too, so I wouldn't have had it any other way . . .

GF: *The Adderall Diaries* deeply examines the concept that no one person owns The Truth, and that everyone has his or her own truth. In the book, you explore the ways your father's truth differs from your own. The way you come to accept your dad's ownership of his version of events feels awe-inspiring and redemptive to the reader, and appears to have been transformative to you as a writer/person. Can you talk about your process in coming to forgive your father despite the many real abuses done to kids who cannot defend themselves? In other words, what is the relationship between the subjectivity of "truth" and the real existence of "right" and "wrong" in the actions we perpetrate on others?

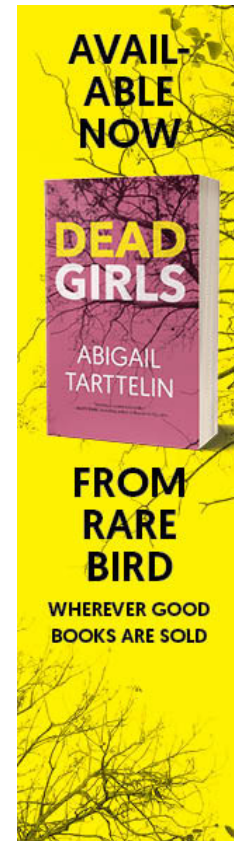
SE: Jesus, this is tough question to start with. Here's the thing, you have to look at this from two places.

From the point of society we need to do a much better job at protecting children and much of that is about money. We need better staff to child ratios in the group homes, better paid teachers in public

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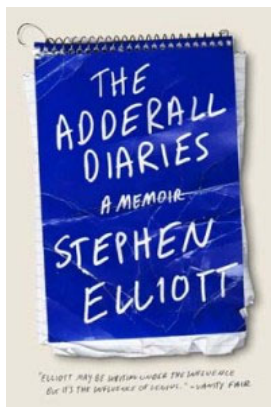


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words, more than one chance. They need the kind of multiple chances that children in better homes get.

But from the point of the individual it's hard to heal without forgiving. It's not about right and wrong. Your anger might be fully justified but who is it hurting?

Despite the revelation of many intimate details of your life and psyche in *The Adderall Diaries*, the narrative never feels insular or narcissistic, but rather passionately engaged with the wider world. Talk about your decision to weave in outside plots, such as the murder of Nina Reiser, and how this may have changed your writing process and the end result of the book. How do you advise young writers to ensure that their work is “bigger” than a mere confessional tell-all while still being honest?



(http://www.thenervousbreakdown.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/adderalldiaries_cover.jpg) I appreciate that. But writing a memoir is always narcissistic. Most art and writing is narcissistic. Of course, that's different from *feeling* narcissistic. As a writer you have to always remember the reader doesn't give a shit about you. If you're not

offering the reader anything they're going to put the book down.

The reader is the most important person with a book. The reader is doing the writer a favor. So any decision that doesn't take the reader into account is a bad decision. Holding back information because you're uncomfortable is just as bad as providing too much information because you want to get something off your chest. Everything has to serve the story.

Of course, there is no such thing as a book that everybody likes. The goal is writing your reader's favorite book.

The thing to remember about honesty is that it's much more than just not lying. Honesty is bordered by self-knowledge. It's a goal, but it's not actually attainable, because to be perfectly honest you'd have to have perfect self-knowledge, and for that you would have to be a person that



(<https://bit.ly/r9sgSc>)

never changes.

I don't remember your exact wording, but you wrote once in a Daily Rumpus that the world does not owe artists/writers a living for following their passions and creating the art they want to make . . . I was very struck by this and have brought it up in recent interviews I've done about my own work. I think what you meant is that most of the world doesn't get paid to do something they love or that is their singular passion, and that artists can't expect that either—that the economic world is quite separate from the artistic world, and that if you choose not to compromise and get a job that the culture rewards financially, you're making a choice and have to accept responsibilities and the consequences of that choice. I deeply agree with that sentiment. Yet I also believe that it's unfortunate—even tragic—that art *is* so devalued by most people, and certainly those in power, and I think you would probably concur. So I find myself with this paradox: I believe artists "deserve" to be paid, and that their work has true value . . . yet I also believe that refusing to conform to the existing cultural norms of having a work-a-day job is a choice (sometimes a luxury), whether those norms are right or wrong. Hmm . . . I'm not sure where the question is in here . . . I guess that, in a sea of writers who seem to be constantly be belly-aching about being underpaid, I was very intrigued by someone—especially someone who doesn't have much money—being bold enough to say that we've made our own beds and should perhaps stop whining. Am I understanding your views correctly, and can you talk more about your philosophy of art vs. commerce?

I think you're understanding my views correctly. I'm in favor of more funding for the arts in a very general sense. But who would get that funding? And people would still complain that they weren't getting the scholarships, grants, etc.

I was awarded a Stegner Fellowship that funded me for two years and it was one of the best things that ever happened to me. Still... I had already written three books at that point, and continued writing books after the funding ran out.



(<https://bit.ly/o7DkbJ>)

I understand journalists who are upset because they can no longer afford to do in-depth stories but I don't understand writers who think they are owed a living for writing a novel they want to write. And I actually think it's a very negative space to be in, since everybody (or almost everybody) has a job when they write their first novel. I think what happens often is people associate the money they're paid for their art with the value of their art, and that's a disaster for the work.

When I finish writing something I always try to get as much for it as I can, but I never (or almost never) write it for that reason. I'm able to write whatever I want because I keep my expenses extremely low. I don't have children; I pay cheap rent. Sometimes I worry about my financial security, but never in terms of writing. When I think of how I'm going to scrounge some money I never think, "I should write something."

Speaking of money: we both grew up in Chicago, around the same time, in neighborhoods where being a writer was basically unheard of as a profession or aspiration. It never occurred to me to major in Creative Writing in college because that seemed like something a kid with a trust fund would do, whereas my parents were below the poverty line, and my dad had never finished elementary school . . . now you, of course, have a background of economic hardship—living in group homes or on the street—that even far surpasses mine. Can you talk about your process in coming to identify as a writer/artist and whether you found your “class” background to be a barrier, an asset, or both?

Well, that's tricky. I left home when I was thirteen and slept on the streets for a year and then I was made a ward of the court (full story on that here: <http://therumpus.net/2009/04/where-i-slept/>). I spent the next four years in group homes and went to college on a scholarship. But before that I lived in a nice house. We weren't rich, but we were certainly middle class.

All I'm saying is it's not a competition.

I never really identified as a writer. I was a history major in college. But I always wrote a lot. I never imagined it as something I could do as a profession, and I guess I was right about that. I did start publishing at

some point, and then I got the fellowship, and it was all really kind of sudden. Like, I sent these two novels to the slushpile of a new publisher (MacAdam/Cage), and they bought both of them for \$18,000 a piece, and I got the fellowship to Stanford a month later.

I think traveling across many social classes has mostly helped me as a writer and a person. Middle class, group home, Stanford. I think that's mostly an asset, on the whole.

In *The Daily Rumpus* as well as in your books, you write a lot about love, desire, loneliness, attachment and sex—to say that you have a romantic temperament would, I think, be a distinct understatement, and I mean that in a good way, the way it's also true of, say, Steve Almond. Yet you've indicated in some of your writing that you don't think you're really cut out to be in a long-term relationship, and that you remain immature for your age. Given that commitment can come in all shapes and sizes, can you talk about what it takes, in your view, to be in a successful longstanding relationship and what constitutes the “maturity” for this to be possible?

I don't think I can.

Your book tour for *The Adderall Diaries* was one of the most unusual and comprehensive in the history of book tours—it would probably be fair to say that you may officially be the “go to” guy now on the topic of touring! What do you counsel all new writers to do when their books come out? Is there anything you did that you wouldn't do again or feel was either not successful or was more trouble than it was worth?

I don't think I would do any of it again because I've already done it. When people ask me how to market their books I usually say they need to do something that nobody else has done. If it's the thing you're supposed to do when marketing a book then people are already doing it and it's probably worthless.

The most important thing is to write a great book. That's 50%, at least. If you can do that you have a chance. If you can't do that the odds get longer.

How has launching The Rumpus and writing The Daily Rumpus impacted your life? Discuss the rewards of The Rumpus and what, in general, drives writers (outside of any economic impetus) to take time away from their own work to help other writers, generate cultural dialogue and foster community.

The Daily Rumpus email was supposed to be just a bunch of links to interesting things on The Rumpus. Instead it became just a free-write, where I just write about whatever I'm thinking. Sometimes I make up stories. Often I think about things like marketing, connecting, relationships, love. A little about sex. Or I review things I'm reading and seeing. It's gotten to the point where I spend two or three hours on it every day. It's replaced long form writing as my creative outlet. For a while I fought against it, but now I embrace it. I just love writing them. It feels so fulfilling. I don't know what they're going to mean in the larger picture of my "career", but that's also because I don't know what shape literary writing is going to take. It feels like a whole new form. I don't know if anybody else is sending out an email of new literary writing every day.

As far as what drives writers to foster community, to take on editing projects and create publishing houses, I think it's all of a piece. Those that are pushed to do those things are probably also gaining some creative substance from doing them. But hell if I know.

What are you most excited about right now?

I'm excited to see *Animal Kingdom* tomorrow night. But you're asking something else. I'm definitely curious to see how all of *this* turns out.

For those readers who don't subscribe to The Daily Rumpus and may not have heard you wax rhapsodic about Roberto Bolano, whose *Savage Detectives* knocked me on my ass as well, will you riff a little here on why he's the greatest thing since sliced bread and everyone should go out and read him immediately?

I was talking with a writer about Bolano's *2666*. He hadn't read it but said he heard it was so good it made you not want to write. I told him it was the opposite. It was so good it made you only want to write. It

that.

Elaborate on this line from *The Adderall Diaries*, and the way this fact impacts your own life, identity and choices as an artist: “The books of our time have little to do with the destruction of the self. We expect our bards to survive, to figure things out.”

I guess what I was saying is I’m a mess.

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GINA FRANGELLO is the fiction editor of The Nervous Breakdown. She is the author of three books of fiction: *A Life in Men* (forthcoming from Algonquin in Feb 2014), *Slut Lullabies* (Emergency Press) and *My Sister's Continent* (Chiasmus 2006). She is also the Sunday Editor at *The Rumpus* (<http://therumpus.net/>), and was the longtime editor of the literary magazine *Other Voices*, as well as the co-founder and executive editor of its book imprint, *Other Voices Books* (<http://ovbooks.com/>) (now an imprint of Dzanc Books). Her short stories have been published in many lit mags and anthologies, including *A Stranger Among Us: Stories of Cross Cultural Collision and Connection*, *Prairie Schooner*, *StoryQuarterly*, and *Fence*, and her essays, journalism, reviews and interviews have appeared in such venues as the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Huffington Post* and the *Chicago Reader*. In her nonexistent spare time, she runs a writing program out of Mexico, Other Voices Queretaro.

43 responses to “The Most Together Fucked-Up Guy in the Universe: A Conversation with Stephen Elliott”



1. [stephen \(http://popserial.tumblr.com\)](http://popserial.tumblr.com) says:

August 27, 2010 at 12:52 pm (<http://thenervousbreakdown.com/gfrangelo/2010/08/the-most-together-fucked-up-guy-in-the-universe-a-conversation-with-stephen-elliott>)